

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Rotational Grazing Helps Organic Rancher Accomplish Goals

A passion for natural, wide-open spaces is driving southern Iowa organic grass farmers Mike and Dan DeCook to “re-wild” their land in the most holistic way possible. For their cattle business, this means adopting an organic grazing system that includes just grass, trees, mineral and water—no chemicals of any kind.

The DeCook brothers run a 450-head organic cow/calf, rotational grazing system on 750 acres of rough, hilly, tree-laden pasture in Marion County, near Lovilia. Their parents, Mark and Kay, purchased the property about 20 years ago. In the late 1990s, Mike and Dan took over daily farming operations. “We’re very passionate about protecting open space and wild landscapes, but still do-



Mike DeCook

The DeCooks currently have 450 head, including more than 260 cows. Mike and his wife, Laura, are trying to “re-wild” their land. They even changed the color of their formerly white house to fit into the landscape.



CONSERVATION *Showcase*



ing agriculture and fusing all that together,” said Mike. The family recently started its second year producing certified organic livestock.

NRCS Planning Helps Achieve Goals

Mike says the family goal is to run a low-input, ecologically-friendly, profitable business. To help achieve that goal, the DeCooks adopted a multipaddock rotational grazing system in 2001 on a recommendation by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). DeCook says the 550-acre rotational grazing system, planned and designed by NRCS, will someday allow their cattle to graze year round.

The DeCooks received financing through the NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP is a voluntary program that assists in the installation and implementation of structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land.

District Conservationist Jay Jung, with NRCS in Marion County, says grass height and health show the producer when it’s time to move the cattle. Livestock move from paddock to paddock in a multipaddock rotational grazing system, according to forage use.



Organic livestock producer and grass farmer Mike DeCook (left) takes a look at his rotational grazing plan with Marion County District Conservationist Jay Jung.

Rotational grazing allows pastures to rest and regrow, provides for a longer grazing season, more evenly distributes manure (fertility) throughout the paddocks, controls weeds and brush naturally, improves the quality of feed for cattle, and increases stocking rates. Rotational grazing also prevents soil erosion by maintaining a uniform forage cover.

Mike DeCook says the best pastures include a combination of warm and cool season grasses. With the implementation of the rotational grazing system, he has seen a lot of new legumes. “If you graze right, a lot of other things get right,” he said.

Other benefits from the DeCooks’ rotational grazing system include spending less time moving the animals and less stress for livestock. “We used to have a roundup—kind of cowboying them up—but it was too much stress on us and the cattle,” said Mike. “Now, I open the gate and call them. I check the water and the mineral, and by the time I get back they are usually all in [the new paddock].”



Cattle are often more tame and less stressed with a rotational grazing system.

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Organic Success

Why did the DeCooks decide to produce certified organic livestock? The brothers say they were ecologically-minded even as young kids. “The wilder and more natural the country, the better,” says Mike. “I’m not a fan of anything genetically modified or any toxic chemicals. I don’t want to use it and I don’t want to be around it,” he says. “I like putting things back on the land that are beneficial—not just stuff that boosts yields, but helps everything—from earthworms to soil bacteria to bobolinks.”

He admits the transition to certified organic livestock was difficult. Instead of using chemicals to control flies, worms and parasites, DeCook built up the cattle’s immune system over time. “The first couple years were tough. We had a lot of cows that couldn’t make it,” he said. The cattle are now thriving.

DeCook says low input costs are the key to increased profits. Instead of driving all-terrain vehicles, the DeCooks ride horses to move cattle and enjoy their property. He says they don’t need a lot of equipment. The cattle do most of the work. “All we do for the cattle is provide them forage, mineral and water,” he says. “If more people knew that you can make a decent living with grass, I think they would do it. I think stress levels would go way down.”

In today’s times of high commodity crop prices, Jung says he’s thrilled there is a producer who still believes in grass. “I’m excited that he knows his land needs to be in grass,” says Jung, “and that he’s finding a way to make a living at raising cattle. Southern Iowa is cattle country, and it needs to be in grass.”

For more information about a conservation plan

to help you achieve your farming operation goals, visit your local USDA Service Center.

Wetland Fits DeCooks’ Goals

Since wetlands are naturally effective in improving surface water quality and recharging groundwater, it should surprise no one that the DeCooks recently restored a 279-acre wetland through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), near the Hammond Covered Bridge, just south of Attica in Marion County.

Through WRP, NRCS provides technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts. The goal is to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every acre enrolled in the program.

The DeCooks seeded their wetland with a native mix harvested from the Doolittle Prairie, a 40-acre tract of pothole prairie in Story County. “I think that’s the best mix you can get in Iowa,” said Mike DeCook. “It’s very diverse.”

Wetlands also help reduce flooding and sediment delivery, protect biological diversity, and provide wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.

*Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines
June 2008*

Helping People Help the Land

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

